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ABSTRACT

This booklet promotes the use of focus groups as part of a strategy for understanding and improving minority participation throughout independent higher education. A focus group is a small discussion group designed to elicit perspectives about a particular topic, with discussion generally intended to identify hypotheses, issues, and an overall sense of direction, rather than definitive or projectable data. These groups can help suggest short-term and long-term initiatives for institutional change. The sections of this booklet contain materials from a training program for independent colleges and universities. The first section discusses the following topics concerning preparation necessary for holding a focus group: (1) number of participants; (2) group composition; (3) recruiting for the event; (4) site for the focus group; and (5) equipment. The second section offers advice to focus group moderators concerning the following topics: (1) style; (2) starting up; (3) non-directive assistance to the discussion; and (4) closing the session. The third section offers ways to analyze and report the focus group findings, including the use of an audiotape of the proceedings and organization of the report. The fourth section is a topic guide in a dialogue/modular format that can be adapted to various groups. The fifth section contains excerpts from focus groups conducted in 1989-90. (JB)

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Using focus groups to improve minority participation

National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
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MINORITIES ON CAMPUS

Thank You for Asking!

Using focus groups to improve minority participation

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Introduction

When it comes to the participation of minority students, faculty, and staff, most independent colleges and universities in the United States share at least two characteristics:

- They have made special efforts in recent years to increase their minority recruitment and retention and to improve their campus climate for people of color.
- Whatever their level of accomplishment, they would like to do better.

In the spring of 1989, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) set out to help its members do better. A NAICU/NIICU Task Force on Minority Participation in Independent Higher Education began to look at ways to assess and improve the campus climate; at ways to develop effective partnerships with other colleges and universities or with elementary and secondary schools; at short- and long-term strategies to increase minority faculty; and at lessons to be learned from historically black and other minority institutions.

The task force also looked at ways campuses could identify and better understand the needs and perspectives of minority students, faculty, and staff, and involve them directly in discussions that might lead to a new or expanded agenda for action. The result was a program of focus groups that demonstrated the effectiveness of these groups as part of a strategy for understanding and improving minority participation throughout independent higher education.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a small discussion group designed to elicit perspectives about a particular topic. The discussion generally is intended to identify hypotheses, issues, and an overall sense of direction, rather than definitive or projectable data. In addition to providing useful background information, the groups can help suggest short-term and longer-term initiatives for institutional change. They can always be supplemented by questionnaires or other methodologies if more quantitative analysis is needed.

Focus groups are relatively inexpensive, and the technique is not difficult to use. Experience confirms that people like to be asked for their views. Members of minority groups, in particular, frequently express both surprise and appreciation that the institution values what they think and wants them to speak for themselves. Even if few tangible actions result from the discussions, improved communication is healthy. In many cases the results are tangible, with the added benefit that they have emerged out of a participatory process that lends both credibility and support.

Focus groups can be used to explore such questions as:

- What are the educational aspirations of minority high school students and their families? How can we attract and better serve more of these students?
- What are the perceptions of minority students already enrolled? How can we improve their experiences?
- What are the needs and concerns of minority faculty, administrators, and staff?

- What are the views of nonminority students, faculty, and staff about the participation of minority individuals, and about special efforts to encourage such participation? How do members of the governing board view these issues?

The NAICU task force worked with Herbert I. Abelson, senior vice president of Response Analysis, a market research firm in Princeton, New Jersey, to develop a training program for independent colleges and universities that wished to make use of focus groups. More than sixty NAICU members participated in the training programs. Most of those schools subsequently conducted one or more focus groups on their campuses.

The following sections include materials from the training program, the suggested topic guide that was developed by the task force, and excerpts from the reports submitted to NAICU on the focus groups conducted on individual campuses.

Laying the Groundwork

A focus group discussion is typically about two hours—long enough to get a group working. It includes eight to ten participants plus a moderator. The discussion is tape-recorded. Participants are encouraged to talk about themselves and their first-hand experiences, not about what they believe are general perceptions or the experiences of others. It is important to think carefully about location and time of day so that neither discourages attendance. The availability of food (lunch or just snacks) can be an effective incentive, especially with student groups.

The following are some general guidelines for recruiting focus group participants.

Number of Participants

Between eight and ten respondents is best. At least eight will be enough to insure that discussion is shared among several people. On the other hand, more than twelve participants often makes a group hard to control because of too many distractions, difficulty in maintaining control for the moderator, and difficulty in finding a comfortable seating arrangement around a table. If it is past the

scheduled starting time for a discussion and twelve respondents have arrived, the moderator should excuse any others who come later.

Composition

Each group should be made up of people with the same relationship to the college or university, e.g. all entering students, all upper-class students, all faculty. Most groups should also share the same ethnic background, which raises the comfort level for the respondents. However, having at least one heterogeneous group can provide some insights into the tension level on campus. The group may be single sex or coed, but if it is mixed, at least three men and three women should be included.

Recruiting

Initial contact should be made by phone or in writing one to two weeks before the scheduled meeting. If the initial contact is in writing, a phone follow-up will increase the likelihood of a commitment to participate. After the participant has accepted, send a written acknowledgment that repeats the time and place, mentions lunch or snacks (if appropriate), and repeats any other incentives offered for involvement. A reminder phone call the day before the interview is almost essential to insure attendance.

Site for the Focus Group

A room with a large conference table (or smaller tables that can be pushed together) is desirable, but not mandatory. Participants could also sit in a semicircle with a few low tables to hold refreshments. If there is a minimum of outside traffic noise, the quality of the audio-taping will improve.

Equipment

The room should have a blackboard or an easel with a large pad of paper and markers. Refreshments should be easily accessible. A good quality tape recorder and at least two sixty-minute blank tapes are essential. Focus group discussions generally are not intimidated by the recorder. The group must be told it is being taped. If there is an

observer in the room, that person should be identified. There should be badges or some other form of identification for the participants to identify themselves by first name. Pads and pencils can be made available as well.

Thoughts for New Moderators

Most new moderators are very passive at the beginning of a group. Until you learn a good style for yourself, err in the direction of being too active rather than too passive. Your job is to infuse the room with energy.

At the start, do one of these things: lead the group into the meeting room yourself, or stand at the door while they file past you, or be inside while someone else leads them into the room. No participants should be seated in the room unless you are there too.

Say hello, shake hands with each person, and keep talking if no one else is. There should be no silence in the room. Encourage the group to have some refreshments. Just be there! Take charge, talk, and make the group feel as comfortable as possible. You cannot do too much talking, moving around, shaking hands, and offering hospitality.

Nearly always, meetings start late because participants are waiting for late arrivals. No matter when you start, tell the group that the discussion will end *no more than two hours from when it was scheduled to start.* If you start at 2:10, you would still tell the group in your orientation that "We will go until 4:00 at the latest." Keep your promise. What you have not learned in two hours, you are unlikely to learn after that. It is not the group's problem if you start

late. The respondents who are there are not the ones who are holding things up.

When you actually do start the group, bring lots of energy into it. Introduce yourself again, even if you have already introduced yourself to each respondent. Say in a peppy, easy-to-hear, up-beat voice: "Good morning (afternoon, evening). I am (first and last name) and I want to welcome you here today (tonight)." Then keep right on going without looking at your notes.

During the introduction, be sure to cover all of your points. Most new moderators overlook something. Each point in the introduction helps to create an environment in which you will be able to work more effectively. When you ask the group if anyone has been in a group like this before, and a couple of people raise hands or say yes, follow up. Find out when, what the topic was, and what it was like.

Early in the interview, the group is trying to determine what the "real" agenda is, and how they can survive in it or contribute to it. Unless there is a real reason for withholding information, tell the group exactly why they are there. Any way that you can tell the group what you expect from them will lead to more of the kind of information you are seeking.

This is a focus group, so focus your questions. Ask for the last time respondents did/bought/felt/believed something. Get the group talking concretely; discourage generalities. Be careful not to ask questions about "what do you usually do..." because nonspecific questions will get you weak and nonspecific responses. Instead, ask about the last time that something happened, and then get the details of the actual experience. You will not get the best out of the group unless you keep at them to express behavior, not opinions or attitudes. Some issues do not lend themselves easily to behavior questions, but most do.

Watch out for your own mannerisms and quirks of speech that may communicate unintended messages to the group. For example, saying "OK" every time you want to move on is confusing and not effective.

Vary the pace (speed, loudness, and emphasis) to suit the discussion. Before you get experienced enough to do that, it is better

to be too empathetic, too loud, too speedy, or too pushy. Most new moderators have a pace that is too slow, with not enough variation. They are deliberate, measured, and not spontaneous much of the time. If you behave in this fashion, don't expect the group to be animated, lively, and full of ideas. In many instances, the group will reflect the style and amount of energy that you put out.

Most new moderators are passive, rather than nondirective. Be nondirective if you can. Ask follow-up questions and probes, even if you are getting into topics that appear later on in the topic guide. Frequently ask the group for summaries, and give summaries yourself. Cues for summaries do not have to be in the topic guide; they are assumed. Have summaries after each topic area. Sometimes you summarize ("This is what I hear you saying"), but more often, ask the group to summarize ("Tell us what we have been saying about.... How would you summarize it?").

After you have asked a question and one or two people say something, keep going on that question. Don't go to another question just because two or three participants have said something. Is the issue being addressed the way you want? Are you eliciting enough information to satisfy the need? Even standard probes like "What else?" or "Can you say more about that?" are very useful.

There is a tendency for all of us to talk to the group as if we are the main speaker and they are the audience. Moderators may say things like "Now I would like to talk about...." The preferred way would be "Now let's talk about...." or something that keeps the focus on the group and off you.

The group always wants to know if it is meeting your expectations. When a group has been especially informative, say so. If you like what they are doing, tell them so. Use verbal reinforcement.

The discussion so far has been rather generic, applying to the group as a whole, but there are some special problems that may require attention. The final suggestions for new moderators focus on those situations. However, the moderator should never forget that the topics under discussion are sensitive issues. The possibility of tapping into emotions is high, and you must be prepared to handle such a situation.

As the moderator you may have someone in the group who talks more than you would like. Sometimes they know more about the subject than the other participants, and sometimes they talk a lot because they usually talk a lot (to show off, to reduce their anxieties, to control the situation). Such respondents can create difficulties for the moderator. The moderator wants them to talk less, but does not want to insult them, and wants to preserve an atmosphere that encourages everyone to participate.

Handling this possibility begins with recruiting. Get people who do not have a lot of group interviewing experience, and get respondents who do not know each other before the interview starts. Pre-existing acquaintances sometimes talk to each other too much, and say things to impress each other in the presence of the group.

Set the stage in your introduction. Your interest is only in what each person thinks and feels, their own thoughts of the moment, but not in what they think others feel, or what the family thinks. You can remind them of your introduction later if needed because almost all big talkers very soon start talking about other people rather than themselves. Tell the group what you expect. If you want an interactive group where they do most of the talking to each other, even questioning and commenting to each other, while you just provide a sense of direction, tell them. That way you can also stop a dominant person by referring to the desire for everyone to participate equally.

Some groups have an agenda different from yours. They think they came to complain about the institution. You may think they came to discuss expectations, campus life, or retention. If participants appear to have come prepared (something that they have been rehearsing for the group), get it out right away. You can tell when there is a lot of energy on a subject early in the interview.

During the interview, look expectantly at the people from whom you want to hear, and look away from respondents who have already contributed more than their share.

There is often a need to verbally direct discussion away from some respondents and toward others. You can do this indirectly—"Let's hear from someone who has not spoken yet"—or you can do it directly when a talkative respondent grabs the floor and starts to run

with your next question. Interrupt the person right away and say, "Let's hear from the rest of the group first, and then we'll come back to you." These quotes convey the idea, but you should alter them to fit your own style and situation. Remember, you are not trying to silence someone. You just want to create a climate in which all the participants have time and motivation to express themselves.

Of course, there are also respondents who are too quiet. Go easy on calling on them in the beginning, before the group is a working group. Look at them expectantly, and call on them by name toward the end of the interview. The best way to get participation is to create conditions from the beginning to increase the chances for participation by everyone. Make sure that everyone says something early in the interview, and do it without calling on people. It is sometimes as simple as breaking the ice so each person hears himself or herself say something in front of the group. Someone who does not talk for the first half-hour may become too embarrassed to volunteer anything later.

The end of the interview is also very important. If you change the ground rules or the context or the expectations at the end, you have a shot at getting some new and even higher-quality information.

Shut off the tape recorder about fifteen minutes before the end and call attention to it: "Sometimes people don't like everything they say to be taped." That's all. Don't make a speech about the tape recorder; just be conspicuous about shutting it off.

When you approach the time limit on the interview, announce crisply that there are five minutes left. Say it a little louder than usual and with a tone of finality about it. Also announce when one minute remains. When the time is up, stop. If you want the benefit of time tension, you have to be very specific. You can't say, "We have just a few more minutes," and expect any new information to come out. You have to say, "We have exactly five minutes to go before we break up, and I want you to be sure that you don't think of something on the way home that you wish you had told us. So here's your chance."

If there are observers behind the mirror—especially observers who are the sponsors of the research or knowledgeable about the subject matter—it can be very productive to have the observers come

into the focus group room about fifteen minutes before the interview ends. Introduce the observers and let them ask and answer questions while the moderator moves to one side. The observers can often learn things that would not otherwise become available. Respondents sometimes say things to the observers that they did not say in the interview up to now.

At the end, express appreciation, straighten out any misunderstandings that the discussion may have suggested, and invite questions. Abelson also recommends distributing a brief questionnaire to the focus group participants to collect basic demographic information.

For further guidance on conducting group interviews, you may want to consult:

Alfred E. Goldman and Susan S. McDonald. *The Group Depth Interview*: Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987.

Thomas L. Greenbaum. *The Practical Handbook and Guide to Focus Group Research*. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath & Co., 1988.

Analysis and Reporting

Whether institutions plan to conduct one or many focus groups, but especially if they plan to conduct a continuing series over time, they may wish to develop a format for recording and analyzing their findings. No matter how compelling a discussion may seem while it is occurring, impressions and recollections can fade. The audiotape helps to preserve the verbatim discussion, but institutions may find the following format helpful in distilling the most important information elicited from each focus group.

There are a variety of approaches to analyzing and reporting data from focus groups. The following is suggested as one of those ways, but it should not be taken as the only way. Each institution should assess its own needs and adopt the approach that responds best to those needs.

The suggested procedure for analysis has four basic components. First, someone should be responsible for analyzing each group and putting together a report. Whoever moderates a group should also prepare the analysis for that group. However, institutions may have reasons for wanting someone else to be responsible. If someone other than the moderator is the analyst, it is recommended that this person attend the focus group as an observer.

Next, immediately after the conclusion of the group, while still in the focus room, the observer(s) and moderator should discuss the group. Get everyone's ideas about what happened, what was learned, and what opportunities were not developed that could be included next time. This is a ten- to twenty-minute exercise. The moderator or the analyst should take notes for future reference.

Then a summary memorandum should be prepared for each group. The moderator or the analyst should prepare this memorandum as soon as possible after the focus group. It is an impressionistic collage, an uncritical chain of associations from the person whose purpose it is to get as much as possible into a dictating machine or a word processor while the experience is still fresh. The best, perhaps only, time to get this done is the same day as the interview. After the first day, the decay is rapid and the benefit is mostly lost. These memoranda will save enormous amounts of analysis time. Having them can preclude the need for the laborious transcribing of tapes, and thus save hours of searching the transcripts for excerpts to put in the reports. However, especially if you do not transcribe the tapes, you will want to listen to parts of them and identify verbatim comments.

Those comments, however, must never be associated with an individual or reported in such a way that someone might be able to identify the speaker. The protection of the identity of the respondents is absolutely essential. Having promised anonymity as a condition of participation, it is incumbent upon the moderator to fulfill that commitment. The quality of the data is entirely dependent on the confidentiality of everything said by the group.

The final component is the main findings. As a section of the summary memorandum, begin to identify individual findings and verbatim comments that relate to them. Often the findings can be identified from notes that you make while the group is going on. The verbatim comments cannot usually be taken in full at the time they are spoken, but you can make notes that are cues to findings that you or the analyst can locate on the tape later. Each finding should be keyed to the topic guide section to which it applies.

The final report on all of the focus groups should have four parts—an introduction, highlights and conclusions, main findings, and an appendix.

The *introduction* should include the number of groups, their composition, the period during which groups were conducted, and any other relevant information. Include a disclaimer if you are distributing your report on campus. It should indicate that the focus group method is intended to identify hypotheses and issues, but is usually not relied upon as a source of definitive information (unless you are seeking the perceptions of the respondents rather than their experiences). It provides a sense of direction rather than data that can be used to make projections.

The *highlights* or summary should be an outline of numbered statements that express the main findings from all the groups without any supporting information. If groups are composed of different types of respondents, use separate numbered statements for each type.

The *conclusions* should follow the same numbered statement format and provide evaluation, judgments, and implications that you draw from the findings. Use your experience and intuitions when constructing this section.

The *main findings* are the main body of the report. Each of the numbered statements in the highlights section becomes a numbered headline at the top of a new page. Thus you can draft the main findings section first and then excerpt the highlights section from it.

Each individual finding should be presented first as a headline with the appropriate section and question in the topic guide indicated. A paragraph should follow, explaining and elaborating on the headline. Verbatim comments excerpted from the focus groups will illustrate and support the headline. Use at least three comments and try to draw them from all the groups. It is helpful to identify the source of the comment by sex, ethnicity, and category (student, faculty member, freshman, board member). If you desire, you may express your opinion about the finding or draw conclusions or make a recommendation. Your experience and judgment are an important part of the group interview reports.

The *appendix* includes the tabulation of the self-administered questionnaires for all the groups. This provides a demographic context for the source of the report.

Focus Group Topic Guide

Institutions planning focus groups may be interested in the topic guide that was used in the NAICU training sessions. This guide was designed for use either with entering minority students or with upper-class minority students. Entering students can be a good proxy for the perspectives of high school students, as well as sources of information on first impressions. Upper-class students can reflect on their experiences over a period of time.

The topic guide offers a brief modular section that can be used for discussions with minority faculty or staff. The guide is, of course, also adaptable for use with white students, faculty, and staff, or with governing board members.

In the material that follows, directions for moderators are in *italics*. Questions, comments, or instructions that should be directed to the group are not in italics.

Introduction

1. *Welcome the participants and introduce yourself.*

2. *Explain the research objectives, why we are here.*

3. *Explain the purpose of this group.*

4. *Explain the ground rules.*

   - Focus group research is confidential. Only aggregate responses will be used. There will be no identification of individuals.
   - An audiotape is made for later analysis, then destroyed.
   - *Describe the two-way mirror and observers (if used).*
   - There are no secrets. I'll be glad to tell you anything about the group, the research, and how the information will be used. Sometimes I will postpone answering a question until the end so what I say does not affect the discussion.
   - *If there is a monetary or other incentive for participating, refer to it and when it will be given.*
   - The group will end no later than ____.

5. *Tell the group your expectations about the discussion. Go over each of the following points:*

   - This is intended to be a free-wheeling discussion.
   - You don't have to be called on.
   - The moderator is here to facilitate the discussion, and help the group express itself.
   - Participants can talk to each other directly—they don't have to go through the moderator.
   - Disagreement in the group is expected and a natural part of discussion.
   - Keep the focus on yourself, how you think, feel, and act. The group wants to hear your firsthand experiences and opinions, and is less interested in hearing you talk about the experiences and opinions of other people whom you know.

6. Has anyone participated in a group discussion like this before, for market research, or a public opinion study, or any research purpose? *(If yes, ask each person to tell what the subject was, and how long ago.)*

7. Any questions before we go on?

8. To get started, tell us a couple of things about yourself: How long you have been at _____, what class you are in, what your major field is or will be, and anything else so we can get to know you a little better. *(For this question only, you want to hear from* everyone. *First get responses from volunteers, then ask for anyone else who has not yet spoken, and try to get everyone to introduce themselves. At the end, call on someone only if they have not volunteered.)*

Experience: Critical Incidents

1. Before we go into specific things, I would like you to think of a recent incident, something *you* did within the past few weeks, or something that happened to you, connected with __(institution)__ in some way. Think of an incident that illustrates something good about your experience here. Tell us about it. *(Get incidents from as many of the group as possible. Probe for details to make a full story; be sure that the point of the story is apparent.)*

2. Next, give us one more personal story about something specific that you did or that happened to you in the past few weeks. Something connected with __(institution)__. But this time, tell us about an experience that was not so good, an example of something you wish you had not done, or something where the school does not look so good. *(If possible, involve students who have not yet spoken.)*

3. Up to this point, just from what you have heard other people say in the last ten minutes or so, what conclusions could you draw about this school? What kind of place is it?

Applications, Expectations, Information

1. Let's talk about your decision to come to __(institution)__. Where else did you apply? Let's use the board. Tell me where else you applied and I will write it down. *(Get names of schools from several students and write them on the board or easel.)*

2. Now let's go back to (first student who gave names of other colleges). Tell me some of the pros and cons of each place—a couple of things that you liked, and a couple of things that you did not like about each of these other schools. *(Move along quickly, to get as much as possible from all or several students in a few minutes. Then go back and probe on the following:)*

   a. To what extent did being a minority student affect your decision to come here? Or was it mostly other factors that made the difference?

   b. *(If appropriate)* With respect to treatment of minority students, did you expect any differences between public and private colleges?

   c. *Ask either:* Did anyone consider institutions where most of the students are black (Hispanic)? *or:* I noticed that there was some interest in institutions where most of the students are black (Hispanic).

      What are some of the things that you (like) (do not like) about attending that kind of college or university?

      Would you like it better if there were more or fewer (blacks) (Hispanics) on this campus, or is the number about right? Why do you say that? *(If appropriate)* Why is the number about right?

3. Think back to when you first came here. You had certain ideas about what __(institution)__ would be like. What turned out to be different from what you expected? Just give me one thing that was not what you expected. *(Get as many different things from the group as you can.)*

4. When you were applying here, where did you get your information about this school? *(Probe for college publications, whether there is a publication for minority students, personal communication with admissions office, word-of-mouth with other undergraduates, family, friends. Which sources were more useful, what was learned from each.)*

5. *If college publishes information especially for minority applicants, ask:* Did you find _____ useful? Should the college have special information like this for (black) (Hispanic) students, or would it be better just to have the same information for all students? *(Probe for explanation.)*

6. Think of the information that the college made available to you when you were considering different colleges. Give us your ideas about what else you wish you had or what they could have done better.

7. How many people here are receiving any student aid? To what extent was student aid a consideration when you applied here? How does the student aid that was available to you here compare with what other schools offer?

8. When you came here, were you better prepared academically or not as well prepared as you expected you would be? *(Probe if appropriate.)* How well prepared were you?

9. And last, before we go on, this is a question about your family. How did your family feel about your going to college? Did

they like the idea or did they think you should do something else, like get a full-time job? *(Probe for explanation.)*

Student Experiences

1. Let's talk a little about this school and campus. What is it like to be a (black) (Hispanic) student on this campus? Describe the experience as though you were telling a friend about it at home. *(Probes: Different or about the same as expected? Any barriers to be overcome? Different treatment from other students, minority or nonminority, from freshmen or upper classes? Treatment from faculty? Administration?)*

   (Probe if appropriate.) Are there any advantages to being a (black) (Hispanic) student at this school? Disadvantages?

2. Can you estimate about how many faculty members are (black) (Hispanic)? Does that seem like not enough, or too many, or about right?

3. What value is there for you, if any, in having (black) (Hispanic) faculty?

4. When you were considering this school, did you know that there were (black) (Hispanic) faculty members here? *(If yes)* Did the presence of (black) (Hispanic) faculty make any difference in your evaluation of the school?

5. How are (black) (Hispanic) faculty members treated by the administration, by students? *(This question is intended to be projective, not a report to be taken at face value.)*

6. How satisfied are you with the curriculum that is offered here? What do you like best/least about the curriculum? Are there courses which they do not have that you would like them to add?

7. Does __(institution)__ have a minority affairs office? *(If yes)* What experience have you had with it? Besides that, what

else does it do? In what ways, if any, do you see this office as an advantage to students like yourself? What would you like the minority affairs office to do that it is not doing now, or not doing as well as it could?

Issues

1. Now that we have looked at your own experiences and opinions, I would like to ask you for your views about the school. First, is __(institution)__ doing anything to increase the number of (blacks) (Hispanics) who are enrolled here?

2. After (black) (Hispanic) students enroll here as freshmen, is the administration doing anything to try to keep them here? Should it be doing anything different for (black) (Hispanic) students than for other students?

3. Please give me your ideas about why this school (is) (is not) trying to get and keep more (black) (Hispanic) students.

Wrap-up

1. We are getting near the end. Let's see if we can directly summarize and add to the discussion so far. I am going to ask you for ten ideas for things that __(institution)__ can do to increase the number of (black) (Hispanic) students who apply here. Just give me the ideas and I will write them on the board. What else? *(Number each idea. Get ten good ones. Because it is late in the interview, call on participants by name if needed. Get everyone to participate.)*

2. Next, let's do the same thing again—ten more ideas. This time, give me ten different ideas for what __(institution)__ can do to keep (black) (Hispanic) students here, so they graduate. I will write these as you give them to me.

3. Before we end, is there anything that we should have talked about that we did not cover? Is there anything that you

expected we would give more attention to than we did? Do you have any last words or any questions?

(Thank participants, end group.)

Issues for Interviews with Minority Faculty/Staff

Some of the student topics can be adapted to faculty/staff. In addition, there are some other discussion areas such as these:

- Do you see yourself as accepted for your contribution, or for your ethnicity, or both?
- What reactions to you do you perceive from students, other faculty/staff?
- Are there discrepancies between the institution's policies and practices regarding minority students, faculty, staff?
- Do you have any disappointments or unmet needs?
- What changes on campus are necessary in order to increase the number of minority students enrolled/graduated? How likely is it that such changes would be made within the next five years?
- Evaluate the institution as an academic institution and with respect to success with minority students and faculty.

Excerpts from Focus Groups

The following excerpts illustrate some of the findings from focus groups conducted in academic year 1989–90 by independent colleges and universities participating in the NAICU project.

My neighborhood is drug infested, my parents are very poor. It was very hard for me to come here and study and try to mainstream. . . . I don't want to mainstream any more. I want to be who I am, and if no one else accepts that, then I don't care.

When I'm in the dining hall, if I want to speak my dialect with my friends I don't feel I should be looked down upon. I don't think I should give up part of my culture because other people don't understand what I'm saying, or they don't like that I'm talking that way.

A lot of people who come to this school come from boarding schools and hick towns where they've never seen black people before in their lives. You really can't feel accepted [with them] saying things like, "Oh my God, I touched one. . . ."

You want to laugh? Last year I cut my hand in front of some people and I was bleeding. They said, "Oh my God, your blood's red!"

When they had the Oktoberfest weekend, there was nothing for me to do. All my friends went out drinking and I was the only nondrinker so I just stayed in my room and watched TV. I didn't enjoy myself that weekend. I just felt out of place and totally excluded from the community.

Minorities are sometimes set up to fail by being placed in positions without adequate training, direction, or support. Their failure is then blamed on their inadequacies and race.

Why is it that we talk about white men all year around and we talk about black men for one month, and it's the shortest month of the year at that!

Specific positive academic experiences included tutoring other students, collaborating on projects with people in their department, making the dean's list, being chosen to represent the school for visitors, and being given direction in networking for graduate and professional study. Students noted additional positive experiences such as receiving special attention from faculty and staff, finding advisors very accessible, initiating black studies courses which are supported by departmental administrators, and forming personal relationships and levels of familiarity with teachers despite high ratios.

Extracurricular activities enabled students to make informal contacts with other students and college personnel. Memorable activities included participation in dramatic plays, sports teams, fashion shows, homecoming events, and special school projects such as a "homeless sleepout awareness" and a Thanksgiving food project. . . . The presence of a black student union was cited as a means of drawing students together and drawing student support for each other.

The students felt the need to establish a black student organization on campus. Their comments were: "We have to come together more often." "This will give us a chance to support each other more." "We could assist in minority recruitment." "We need more cultural awareness." As a result of the focus group, a black student organization has been established and we will start conducting human relations workshops for the student body.

The comments centered around problems in academics and language, racist incidents, and a lack of services for black and minority people in the local area. Students were hurt by teachers who did not try to address them individually by name and by teachers who addressed students by their last names. Incidents concerning classroom experiences centered on class discussions which addressed stereotypes; minority students stated that they had to defend against stereotypes of blacks that other students had taken from television and news broadcasts. This problem was amplified when required readings dealt with stereotypical images, derogatory depictions of minority people, and racially offensive language. In addition, black students related negative experiences where they were looked upon in class as the "resident expert" on minority issues since they were minority students. Overall minority students reiterated that they feel compelled constantly by nonminority students and by faculty and staff to prove themselves not only for their own competence but for that of their entire culture.

Students reported experiencing racist incidents such as dorm pranks of vandalism, verbal slurs shouted from dorm rooms. They also reported being spat on by whites who said, "We don't want your kind here." Students also related acts of subtle racism where white students were friendly to minority students in private but not in public or not while in groups. Other acts of subtle racism involved white students who suddenly rejected black students who were elected to positions of leadership. All

students agreed that there should be more social events for minority students, and more events related to minority cultures.

Minority students expressed major concern for the lack of services and social resources in their particular locale. Issues mentioned were the limited opportunities in the area for their hair care needs, church service preferences, radio and media tastes, and social interaction and recreation.

Students listed troubles with campus security in that they have been unnecessarily stopped by security across campus and have had to identify themselves as students. They also noted unwarranted searches by security. . . . Many minority student groups stated that the social interaction of white and black students has been inhibited due to black students' preference for dance and white students' preference for alcohol at parties.

Minority staff members revealed their disillusionment and frustration with affirmative action goals of the administration not being shared by department heads, staff, or students. They said they found that they have to work harder than their peers for the same opportunities. They saw themselves not being accepted for either their contributions or their ethnicity.

The practice of "selling" oneself is not appropriate in all cultures. Therefore, many qualified minorities may go unrecognized, underestimated, and underdeveloped. To break the cycle of academic and professional failure, extra support and encouragement are needed to present the message that each culture has something unique to offer.

Providing an environment conducive to productive relationships between the student/faculty and employee/supervisor is important to both minorities and non-minorities. Management training and racial awareness seminars could help managers understand and manage their staff to attain optimal productivity. Directors, deans, and vice presidents are in their positions because of their expertise; however, there is always the need to stay abreast of the needs, issues, and concerns of minorities.

There was unanimous demand for curriculum changes that reflect multicultural education.

Most students welcomed the idea of special institutional literature which spoke to the unique needs, questions, and experiences of minority students on campus. While they encouraged the idea, they specifically cautioned that such brochures, media and publications should be true to life about the nature of all aspects of campus life for these students. This literature should not be deceptive in projecting a better existence than is reality on the campus. Other minority students thought that special institutional literature would be counterproductive and deceptive. They indicated that minority students should be able to get a good idea about the campus from the literature intended for the general student population.

With regard to our recruiting efforts, we need to keep our message subtle and not pushy. We need to let students know they will become integrated into the student body and not simply be creating a minority presence for us.

Students spent a considerable amount of time discussing what they termed an apparent ignorance about black culture on the part of nonblack students. This ignorance quite often has been hurtful and surprising. Students outlined their experiences where they have had to contend with questions and comments about their hair, food, and outward expressions of emotions. In addition, they stress a need for cultural awareness activities in light of the fact that observances for Dr. Martin Luther King are not respected, planned, or celebrated by the campus community. Minority students emphasized two main contentions that face them on campus. They stated that whites believe that minority students' presence is attributed solely to affirmative action, and minority students are constantly having to prove themselves against a backdrop of stereotypes held by whites.

For some students being the only person in the class from a minority background was difficult and scary. Students quite often

could not find or did not have the support of students in their cultural group. Other remarks included: students' fears of losing their cultural identity among the masses of students; losing their urban heritage; negating their ethnic background; being judged an exception to the racial group for being in college; having to withstand derogatory racial and ethnic comments from classmates; or being prejudged tough, violent or poor by other students.

Students valued the minority affairs office. They saw it as valuable in uniting them, informing them and in offering some guidance. However, they saw that it was being called upon too exclusively as a representative of or aid for minority students.

Hispanic students cited one method which proved to be very successful with students initially entering the institution; they noted that a list was circulated to them from admissions personnel which enabled the students to contact each other prior to arriving on campus. The respondents commented that pre-enrollment programs give an unrealistic picture of the campus by not showing the true racial ratios; in addition, groups were critical of the content of some of the programs which emphasized negative aspects of black culture instead of recognizing positive historical events.

Students recommended: enlisting the help of the black student union in minority recruitment; creating an institutional brochure about minority students' campus life; encouraging minority students to visit the campus; and having present students act as recruiters. In efforts to retain students, the minority student groups suggested institutional changes in curriculum primarily. They recommended instituting multicultural curriculums and black studies courses; requiring more of an emphasis on multicultural materials throughout the curriculum; holding more awareness activities and class projects with multicultural themes; hiring persons who genuinely care about students; allowing students to educate the campus on diversity; and requiring white

students to learn about blacks and multicultural groups since the multicultural groups must learn about them.

Exit interviews should be used with minorities to gain more insight into their reasons for leaving and improvements that the institutions should make in the future for retaining minorities.

Further ideas were the need for more mentoring from past graduates; the need for upper division students to tutor students in lower divisions; the need for better advising; and the need for improvements in college preparation, opportunities for social interaction and ethnic clubs, emergency loan services, work-study opportunities and computer accessibility. They also suggested that institutional partnerships be formed with corporations for internships and monetary support; sensitivity training in cultural diversity be provided at all levels of the institution; and year-long series of workshops on valuing multicultural diversity be open to all members of the campus community.

Some of the minority students do not feel that the university is seriously interested in their special needs, academically and socially. They do not want different treatment, but they would like to know that people at the university care for them and treat them equally.

Although seldom expressed directly, an overall theme is their desire to be accepted as the individuals they are, with recognition and appreciation of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It is important to recognize that these students did not come here expecting to feel like "tokens" of diversity.

The students in all the focus groups were thankful that they had the opportunity to talk about their experiences at the university. They shared openly, honestly, freely and enthusiastically. They expressed their hope that the focus group sessions would produce action on the part of the university. They wished to have a follow-up session and suggested that the university

conduct another series of focus groups but with white students and compare the results.

Although a number of focus group students seemed reluctant at first to share their experiences and feelings, most soon became willing and even eager to speak. The sessions, scheduled for two hours, could easily have continued for three. Nearly all of the students expressed an interest in meeting again; virtually all the students indicated on the questionnaire that more time was needed for discussion. Students generally seemed pleased that we were taking an interest in their views, but were skeptical that their input would actually be used to effect change. Nevertheless, several expressed hope that their involvement would help to bring about change.

The findings that emerge sometimes seem contradictory. The admissions open house was enjoyed and appreciated, yet many felt they did not get the information they needed. Students do not like to be singled out, but want to be recognized as African-Americans, as Latinos. They often want to be asked their opinions on racial issues when in classes, but do not want faculty and classmates to make any assumptions about them.

On a number of issues there was a strong consensus. All agree that racism, prejudice, and ignorance have made them feel uncomfortable. Most of the students feel that their religious beliefs are not respected, and they resent this. There is general agreement that more courses relevant to African-American and Latino experience are needed. Also, the students agree that more African-American and Latino faculty and administrators are needed, as is a greater awareness and sensitivity for multiracial people and cultures throughout the college community.

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